

Sydney Women's History
International Historical Studies

The Unique Relationship between Women's History and Gender History in Japan
In Search of Direction for the Future

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In this paper I would like to discuss chronologically how the study of women's history developed after World War II, and how it came face to face with and reacted to the appearance of the new concept of gender. I intend to do this by looking at the connection women's history has with the social sciences in Japan, in particular history and trends in the study of history, and also by examining its relationship with women's studies in Japan.

The actual study of women's history goes back a long way in Japan. The nation took its first steps towards democracy as a result of the defeat in the Second World War, and in the latter half of the nineteen forties, when women got the right to vote for the first time, interest in the history of Japanese women increased, and a number of books on this subject were published.

Until the nineteen seventies, there were two schools of research in women's history. The first one took a view of it as the history of the liberation of women based on Marxist history, and the other approach was a historical study of how women lived, focusing mainly on their everyday lives. With regard to the contextual reasons for the former method, Marxist history was far more prevalent in Japanese academia than compared to Europe and the USA. Furthermore, Marxist academics in the social sciences had suffered severe suppression during the war at the hands of the Japanese government and military. After the war they were held in high regard for the fact that they had endured this repression while maintaining their freedom in their philosophy and research, and it was because of this that Marxist-based social sciences came to have a great deal of influence in the Japanese academic world.

Marxist history was regarded as a leading science within academia. However, Japanese women's history that used Marxist historical theory was only on the peripheries of this and it was not accepted as a legitimate area of study in academia, and in fact the majority of scholars of women's history were women from outside academia. There were practically no female professors or lectures on women's history during this time in universities.

The other approach, women's history that paid more attention to women's day-to-day existence, took up a critical stance against the Marxist view of women's history as a process of liberation. One scholar, Nobuhiko Murakami, criticized this liberationist history, saying that it was no more than a part of women's history, and although it revealed those individuals and

organizations which took part in the struggle for liberation, it failed to detail the daily lives of huge numbers of nameless women and the energy they had.

Besides these two different stances on women's history, the study of local women's history began to take off around the country. This was completely separate from academic historical studies and it should be emphasized that it was undertaken by people removed from the mainstream of academic circles.

The next major development in the study of women's history in Japan came in the Eighties. The momentum for this was the publication in 1982 by the University of Tokyo Press of the five volume *Nihon Joseishi* ("A History of Women in Japan"), edited by The Research Society for Women's History. The society was formed in order to bring out this series, and I wrote the manuscript for *Bakuhanhô to Josei* ("Women and Feudal Law") which was included in the third volume. At the time my field of speciality was not women's history but rather early modern Japanese history, and I was teaching Japanese economic history at Chûô University, where I am still at today. However, I remember frantically studying about Japan's feudal law and women's history in order to write the manuscript. The writers, among whom men were included, were generally like me, in other words people who were attached to a university and were carrying out some sort of academic research, and with the publication of this book they made their first foray into the field of women's history.

We naturally studied the materials on women's history that had been accumulated by people who were not in mainstream academia, and while making use of these we put the fruits of our academic research to use when writing our manuscripts. This means that a number of people, mainly female researchers, emerged from academic circles to carry out research into women's history, and as a result of this, the study of women's history in Japan was at long last recognized by academia. However, this equated to no more than just being able to gain a seat in the corner, and there were as yet no universities that offered a chair in the subject. The reason why the academics who wrote these essays were able to get positions at universities was not because they studied women's history but rather that they already held positions in other subjects; to give my own experience as an example, I already had a post teaching Japanese economic history. Therefore the mainstream of historical studies remained, as before, far removed from women's history.

Fuelled by the *Nihon Joseishi* series, women's history flourished, and a number of groups and societies formed to study it, including The Research Society for Women's History, The Society for Research on Women's History, and the Society of Historical Studies on Chinese Women, and they wrote and published many books and articles. In addition to researchers who held a position at a university, many scholars of women's history who were not part of official academic circles also joined these societies.

In the Eighties, a major event occurred in an area of study separate from history and women's

history. This was the arrival in Japan of the subject of Women's Studies. It barely needs repeating that this subject established itself in Japan in synchrony with the academic trends that prevailed at the time in North America and Europe. A number of societies related to the field of women's studies were rapidly formed, such as The Women's Studies Association of Japan, and they began researching the subject with great energy. Another aspect that deserves our attention is the introduction of the concept of gender. Based on this new key concept, women's studies in Japan, with sociologists leading the way, rapidly gained in its influence. However, this did not reach the fields of history and women's history during the Eighties. I am sure that many of you here today know that in North America and Europe, women's history and women's studies joined together to challenge the existing system of scholarship while introducing the concept of gender, but during that same period in Japan women's studies, which was gaining popularity as a new subject, and the more traditional Japanese women's history were progressing along completely different paths.

As I mentioned earlier, I myself was on the side of the traditional study of women's history. In the spring of 1990, I was given the opportunity to do some research in London by the university at which I was employed. This was at the same time that *Gender and History* first went on issue in the UK, and the field of gender studies was booming. I was influenced by this, and after returning to Japan I tried to pass on some of this enthusiasm by presenting a paper in the spring of 1993 at a conference held by the Society for Research on Women's History entitled "The Early Modern System and Gender." However, I could not help but feel that many scholars of women's history were skeptical towards the concept of gender, and this was a great pity.

It was only from the latter half of the Nineties that the concept of gender gradually began to have any influence among scholars of women's history in Japan. Even so, there were still many academics who could not accustom themselves to the concept or women's studies in general, and there were some scholars of women's history who criticized those who pursued women's studies. As this was the case among those people who were actually specialists in women's history, it goes without saying that gender did not even become an issue for scholars studying history in general.

I, in fact, used the concept of gender to investigate early modern Japanese history. This was because I thought it necessary to take a look with it at not so much women's history but history itself. In the autumn of 2000, I gave a conference paper at a comparatively liberal symposium in Kyoto. Apparently they let me present the paper because I had been criticizing from the perspective of gender the conventional system of scholarship for early modern Japanese history, which was at that time unusual. My topic was "Early Modern Rural Communities and the Gender Hierarchy: the Household Unit of Business Management, the Social Position of the Farmer, and Masculinity," and the paper brought about a generally adverse reaction. In particular, the fact that I used masculinity as an object for my research provoked people's antipathy. The audience was made up of people who were familiar with women's history, however, although women's history had made a study of

the behavior and state of women, it had not yet analyzed masculinity as a form of homosocial authority. Perhaps I incurred the wrath of the male historians because I had stepped into the realm of male sexuality. Anyway, having psyched myself up in order to present the paper, I had the wind taken out of my sails somewhat, and at the same time I was also made quite aware of how difficult it would be to spread the concept of gender in the academic world of Japanese history.

Recently, women's history and history have managed to maintain a stable, friendly relationship, so much so in fact that it is almost strange. In particular, male scholars in academia have given a great deal of praise to a study in which a detailed positive analysis was carried out into women's lifestyles, daily existence, and work. On the other hand, research such as my own that points out the issues of masculinity and the gender asymmetry in ownership, business management, and work has been completely ignored. A friend of mine who is studying women's history from a similar standpoint as myself clearly stated in a certain academic journal that women's history that introduces the gender concept is a direct threat to the system of scholarship of mainstream historians and may even destroy it, as opposed to the former type of women's history that is on the peripheries of the main stream and in many cases only supplements it, fulfilling no more than a subordinate role.

As we entered the 21st Century, there was a rapid increase in the number of scholars of women's history who were trying to study the subject from a gender perspective, as my colleagues and I had done. Needless to say, however, there are still some people who are trying to portray an image of women in a way completely unrelated to gender. There are also a greater number of scholars of Western history who are showing an understanding of gender studies, but in the areas of Japanese and Asian history the majority of historians are still unconcerned with the concept of gender.

With this being the case, we decided to set up the Gender History Association of Japan, and we began preparations for this in the autumn of 2003. Based on the perspective that research using the concept of gender is the framework for a new wisdom that would uproot the existing system of scholarship, we thought about completely removing the constraints that had been enforced by women's history studies and making a fresh start using the gender concept. On December 4, 2004, the Gender History Association of Japan was founded with around 330 initial members, and it was wonderful that so many scholars of women's history joined the Association.

There are three core concepts behind the Gender History Association of Japan: interdisciplinary study, internationalism, and interactivity. The founding memorandum of intent clearly stated that the Association was founded "as an interdisciplinary research body that will undertake from the perspective of gender a profound study of all areas of scholarship concerned with the history of mankind," in order to "carry out comprehensive interactive and interdisciplinary research of gender in history covering all fields including science, law, politics, folklore, sociology,

the performing arts, music, art, philosophy, religion, education, linguistics, literature, and history.” Moreover, when the vertical axis of history was crossed with the horizontal axis of geography, then the international aspect to gender history, which contains a comparative history perspective, becomes quite apparent.

The founding of an academic study group such as this has probably had quite an impact on many mainstream historians who previously were perhaps unconcerned with concept of gender. Many scholars of women’s history have joined the Association, and the old style of women’s history which opposed women’s studies and the concept of gender and which was subordinate to and on the fringes of mainstream history, is now becoming the minority.

Now having entered the 21st century, it has at last become possible for women’s history in Japan to develop with the concept of gender as one of its key components while working in synchrony with women’s studies. As founding members of the Gender History Association of Japan we would like to keep actively working on our research while extending our ties and cooperation with academic bodies and organizations that are involved in gender studies both in Japan and overseas based on the concepts of interdisciplinary studies, internationality, and interactivity.